Writing Professional Discourse: The Challenges Faced by Malaysian Engineers

Abstract

In Malaysia, English language is taught and used as a second language. Nevertheless, it has become the fundamental requirement for employment or job enhancement. Mastering English language requires mastering of the spoken and the written aspects of the language. Among others, the written linguistic competence requires grammatical and pragmatic competence working in-line to produce a cognitively understandable text. In the petroleum industry, written professional discourse plays an important role as one of the core elements of the communication process. Written workplace literacy in the petroleum industry in Malaysia has yet to be explored requiring further research into the area. Research exploring the actual written communicative events is deemed necessary to understand what is actually being practiced by Malaysian English language learners when their writing skills are put to test in real work situations. It is timely to say that researchers should look at the end product of the learning process involved in the acquisition of writing and evaluate the teaching methods applied. Another reason that prompted this study is the predicted increase in the demand for engineers in Malaysia. This paper presents the findings of an inquest into the challenges faced by Malaysian engineers in the petroleum industry while preparing job-related written communication. Data were extracted by observations at the sites during field visits and semi-structured interviews conducted with 8 engineers from 4 key player companies of the local petroleum industry. Data collected was analysed using the mixed-method approach, combining both qualitative and quantitative techniques. The findings of the observations were triangulated with the findings of the interviews and textual analysis of the Work Procedures. The findings showed that the engineers engage in daily written communicative events and that being competent in writing skills is a crucial requirement in the petroleum industry. The findings are deemed useful when designing and soliciting specific ESP courses for the petro-chemical engineering fields at the higher learning institutions in the country.